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THE VANCOUVER CONVENIENCE STORE ROBBERY PREVENTION PROGRAM: ABSTRACT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Abstract

This report assesses the impact and effectiveness of the Vancouver Convenience Store Robbery Information Program (RIP) and the Robbery Prevention Kit (RPK). The study, funded by the Ministry of the Solicitor General, draws its conclusions from an examination of the program's activities from May 1, 1981 to May 30, 1984. The program and kit are based primarily on environmental design concepts that were created for a similar program successfully used by Southland Corporation (owners of the 7-Eleven convenience store chain). The program was administered by staff in the Crime Prevention Unit of the Vancouver City Police Department. Although approximately one hundred stores were exposed to the RIP, the compliance rate, the extent to which the items of the RPK were used, was very poor (less than 20%). The low compliance rate was partly attributable to the fact that a number of the stores did not consider total compliance important and no provisions had been made by Crime Prevention Unit staff or by local business associations to ensure fuller compliance. From the interviews, however, those who had attended a RIP seminar expressed a greater awareness about what to do in the event of a robbery. Participants in the RIP experienced a lower average loss per robbery incident compared to non-participants. In general,

despite the low compliance rate, this study is able to draw a number of conclusions. Based on the interview data and discussion with CPU staff towards the end of the project , it appears that the RIP did help to promote better relations between the business community and the police. Furthermore, it developed a better awareness among the store owners of the safety steps to take in the event of a robbery. The study also revealed that certain aspects of the RIP should be modified. Various environmental chacteristics (e.g., major transportation routes, land-use patterns, street corner location, and commercial activities) were found to be important in terms of describing those stores which were robbed. Certain store characteristics (e.g., evidence of security devices, store cleanliness, and the store's general layout of shelves) were also found to be significant factors in terms of explaining which stores were robbed. The final section of the report deals with a number of policy, operation and research recommendations.

Executive Summary and Recommendations.

Robbery of convenience stores has been a serious and costly problem affecting the lives of many citizens. The stores owners and employees experience financial loss and occasionally suffer physical injury. The high incidence of convenience store robberies may also indirectly affect the customer because of higher prices for products.

Can anything be done to address the problem? Yes. New techniques and strategies in crime prevention have been developed to address the issue of robberies among convenience or neighborhood grocery stores. In response to a request from the Crime Prevention Unit of the Vancouver Police Dept. in 1981, the Ministry of the Solicitor General provided funding to develop a robbery information prevention program.

The objectives of the RIP, as identified by the Vancouver City Police, were:

1. To reduce, or possibly eliminate, the violence that can occur during the commission of an offence such as robbery.
2. To make the business community more aware of the fact that there are certain things that they can do to protect themselves.
3. To prevent further victimization of members of the community.

4. To provide guidance for potential robbery victims with regard to dealing with difficulties which may arise from a robbery.
5. To help generate better relations between the community and the police.

These objectives are aimed at meeting the primary goal of the program - that is, to deal with the problem of robbery and violence before the fact.

In addition to funding the development of the RIP, this study was commissioned to evaluate the program activities from May 1, 1981 to May 30, 1984. As stipulated in the agreement, the study was designed to assess the impact of exposure to the RIP seminars and use of the Robbery Prevention Kit (RPK) through comparisons between participants and non-participants in the RIP and victimized and non-victimized stores.

Since the RIP is based on environmental design and primary prevention principles, a number of specific issues were examined. These include:

1. Identifying the extent to which reported robberies and the extent of loss and injury are related to such factors as:
   a, Location and other physical environmental characteristics (including store design and layout, and neighbourhood characteristics);

b. Temporal characteristics of the robbery (day, week, and year); and

c. Staff-related characteristics (e.g., sex, age, and ethnicity).

2. For those stores participating and those not participating in the RIP, and those victimized and non-victimized, examine:

a. Victim's decision to report incidents to the police;

b. Staff awareness (for program participants and non-participants) about measures to take before and after robbery incidents;

c. The frequency of robbery incidents for convenience stores and other stores and services, and the extent of injury and loss;

d. Victim's response to robbery incidents and the extent to which such response is congruent with what is advocated by the RIP;

e. Victim's ability to assist police and courts in the apprehension and prosecution of robbery offenders in the ways suggested by the RIP and RPK; and

f. The degree of satisfaction of convenience store owners and staff with police and court response to robbery incidents.

The findings are primarily based on two data sources. Official police records were collected over the 37 month

study period to provide background information about the extent of robbery, extent of injury and loss, and other traditional descriptive information that is readily obtainable from the police investigation reports. The second source of data was based on 103 store interviews. The owners/operators interviewed were drawn from a list of all the stores identified in the city. At the time of the study there were 556 convenience stores in the city. The interviews were divided into four categories: 1) stores which had not participated in the RIP and were robbed (N=41, 21% of all such stores were interviewed); 2) stores which had not participated in the RIP and were not robbed (N=28, 9%); 3) stores which had participated in the RIP and were robbed (N=17, 85%), and 4) stores which had participated in the RIP and were not robbed (N=17, 40%).

The sampling procedures were somewhat mixed. For groups 1 and 2 random sample procedures were used to identify which stores would be interviewed. For group 3 attempts were made to interview as many of the stores as possible since the sample size was small to begin with and since these stores were the most important for comparative purposes. For group 4 we randomly selected about half the stores for interviewing. It was not considered as important to interview all the stores since they had never been robbed and it would not be possible to obtain any information about

the effectiveness of the RIP other than their compliance rate.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Some of the major observations which were made include:

1. Each year convenience stores consistently represented the second highest robbery rate category. Financial institutions had the highest robbery rate.
2. Clearance rates for robberies in British Columbia have steadily declined from 34.8% in 1976 to 26.5% in 1981.
3. Weekends are the most popular days for convenience store robberies. They account for almost 35% of the weekly robberies.
4. Evenings (19:00-23:00) are the favorite hours for convenience store robberies. Nearly 40% of all robberies occurred during this period.
5. The winter months (Nov.-Jan.) are the most prevalent months of the year for robberies. This three month period accounted for over 35% of the annual robberies.
6. The robberies are usually committed by lone robbers while the store is empty of patrons.
7. The robbers tend to be young adult males (20-25) who frequently (over 75%) have a knife or gun while committing the robbery.
8. Although the robber had a knife or gun in over 75% of all the convenience store robberies injuries occurred in less than 3% of the incidents.
9. Those sectors of the city characterized by major

commercial strip development, having a high mix of residential and industrial land-use, having major transportation arteries, and a diverse mix of cultures had the highest convenience store robbery rates.

10. Those stores located on street corners and characterized as having limited interior viewing, cash registers located toward the back of the store, appearing disorganized and dirty, and having few security devices (e.g., mirrors) were the most likely to be robbed.

11. Although not statistically significant, participants were less likely to be robbed than non-participants. There was a marked difference in the risk of injury during a robbery event, participants experienced no injuries.

12. Those stores which had participated in the RIP and were subsequently robbed averaged a lower loss per incident rate than those stores which were robbed and had not participated in the RIP. The average loss was approximately $100 for participants compared to $130 for non-participants.

13. Those stores which participated in the RIP, whether robbed or not, were generally more informed about the procedures which should be taken in the event of a robbery which are advocated by the RIP.

14. Very few (less than 4%) of those robbed were ever informed or made aware of what happened to their case.

This may in part be due to the fact that the arrest rate for convenience stores is fairly low (12%).

15. The RIP helped to promote better relations between small businesses and the police.
16. The media played an important role in promoting the RIP and generally informing businesses and people about its existence and usefulness.
17. Components of the program (e.g., height charts and description sheets) have been adopted by other businesses (primarily financial institutions) to assist in their robbery prevention endeavours.
18. The most significant problem confronting the RIP was obtaining store compliance with the RIP and the RPK. There was less than a 20% compliance rate suggesting that while interest in the program was good, a majority of the stores either did not realize the importance of the need for total compliance or regarded the suggested alterations (e.g., reduce shelf height, remove posters from the window(s), reduce the amount of cash in the register) to comply with the program to be impractical or unnecessary.
19. Time needs to be allotted for the program to take effect. It takes a while for the stores to accept the program and time for the patrol officers to become aware of the existence of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the major findings from the study, a number of implications for policies, operation and future research were offered. They include:

1. Stores which attend a RIP seminar and comply fully with the program and its kit should be given concrete rewards/incentives. This could take the form of reduced insurance rates, special rates on crime prevention devices, a free year's business tax as well as a letter of support from the local police and local business association.
2. Through the use of a handbook, offer small businesses general information about legal protection available to them with respect to shoplifting, employee theft, burglary, bad cheques, false arrest, and robbery. This booklet should be made available, where appropriate, in languages other than English, e.g., French and Cantonese.
3. Since many of the older establishments cannot afford to make all the physical alterations recommended, an inventory check list that would identify what could be done should be designed and administered by those responsible for implementing the RIP. The check list could include items such as increase interior lighting, remove window posters, keep the store clean and tidy,

and/or reduce business hours if located in a high risk area.

4. Consideration should be given to having the city or town pass a by-law which stipulates that, for any new convenience store, certain environmental design aspects must be incorporated into the building and location of such stores.
5. The extent to which the program succeeds or fails is largely determined by the participants' compliance with the program. Police departments, however, have an opportunity to enhance police/community relations by visiting the stores owners/operators and assisting them in putting up/using all the Kit contents. The police role in this program is vital to its success.

Future research on convenience stores robberies should consider:

1. Interviewing apprehended robbers to examine their perceptions about the RIP and RPK. Such interviews could also help to develop typologies explaining travel patterns, search patterns and other behavioural patterns which might further assist in formulating efforts aimed at reducing the risk for stores being robbed.
2. Interview or survey store customers to see whether they are aware of any store security measures which have been implemented or that they believe might be a deterrent.

Information from such interviews could help to identify those aspects of the program which are perceived as important and/or readily recognized by customers.

3. Police departments should be encouraged to keep more detailed statistics on convenience store and other robberies. This would help to differentiate between types of robberies and would provide information more useful for research and crime prevention program development. With the growing sophistication of data management systems, it would seem feasible to be able to design a system which could provide information at various levels of complexity.
4. Since the RPK includes an eyewitness description form which can be used in court, research should attempt to measure the usefulness of the training procedure and of the form in identifying a suspect. The form is an important component of the kit and was rarely used, but its potential value could be substantial.